

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



Ben Office.

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Prime Minister

(2)

no

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L. Meehan

Meehan

23 July 1980

23/7

(Meehan has now, according to the tapes, called off his hunger strike. You may nonetheless like to be aware of the background. Meehan)

Dear Michael,

You, and those to whom I am copying this letter, will have seen reports of the hunger strike by Martin Meehan, a prisoner in Maze Prison. He has now ceased taking liquids, and as a result his condition is causing serious concern. His death would provoke reactions at home and possibly abroad, and you may therefore find it useful to have a note of the present position.

Meehan has for a long time been an active and high ranking member of the Provisional IRA. He was detained under the old Special Powers Act on 10 November 1971. He escaped from Crumlin Road Prison on 21 December 1971 and was recaptured on 9 August 1972. He was sentenced on 27 November 1972 to 3 years' imprisonment for membership of an illegal organisation. That sentence was served as a special category prisoner at Maze.

Meehan was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment on 26 March 1980 at Belfast Crown Court having been found guilty of conspiracy to kidnap and false imprisonment. The offences relate to the kidnapping by the Provisional IRA of a youth in the New Lodge area of Belfast on 11 July 1979. On arrival at Maze Prison on 27 March he joined the dirty protest, but on 19 May announced that he was leaving the protest and was consequently transferred to one of the conforming H blocks at Maze. At the same time he declared his intention of going on hunger strike to draw attention to his claim that he was innocent of the charge of which he was convicted.

He has been on hunger strike continuously since 22 May 1980. He commenced his thirst strike at 8.00 am on Friday 18 July following which there has been a marked deterioration in his condition. His life will be at risk within the next 2-3 days if he persists in his thirst strike, and it became necessary on the evening of 22 July to remove him to the secure wing at the Musgrave Park Hospital, where more sophisticated medical facilities are available. Meehan has again been warned by the doctors and by a senior official of the inevitable consequences of his action if he persists in his hunger and thirst strikes. He might not die immediately if he became

comatose, because the doctors might feel ethically bound to treat him, on the grounds that he was unable to take a conscious decision to refuse treatment. But ultimately irreversible damage to vital organs would result.

He has made no complaints as regards his treatment in the prison, and he speaks highly of the attention which he is receiving from the medical authorities. His wife and his solicitor have tried to persuade him to give up his present action, or at least to take liquids. So far he has refused.

Although Meehan began his hunger strike on 22 May it was not until 25 June that his legal advisers finally presented proper grounds for appeal, when there were only 3 full days of the current court sitting left. It will be mid-September before the appeal can be heard. The timing is a matter for the Lord Chief Justice. The Lord Chancellor's Office are now considering representations on the timing from Neil Blaney, a well-known Independent member of the Dail and a member of the European Parliament. My Secretary of State would not, however, suggest that the judicial process should be disturbed: Meehan's appeal has not been subjected to any delay (at least not by any action of the authorities) and we should not want to create the impression that appeals can be expedited by a hunger strike.

It is difficult to assess reactions to Meehan's death. PIRA have done their best in the last few days to give the impression that he had always been "one of theirs", and their statements have been calculated to stiffen his resolve to continue his action to the end. But Meehan had lost status by being unable to stomach the "dirty protest", and his violent reputation means that there is probably some relief, even among generally sympathetic members of the republican community, that he is in custody. For this and other reasons he would be a less effective martyr now than he might once have been. Demonstrations on the occasion of his death and funeral would involve orchestrated street violence but would probably not be prolonged. Nevertheless, his death could well be used as the pretext for an escalation of other forms of terrorist violence. We are also conscious of possible reaction in the Irish Republic, with potential implications for their co-operation with us.

Copies go to George Walden (FCO), John Halliday (Home Office) and Ian Maxwell (Lord Chancellor's Office).

Yours ever,

Ry Harrington

R A HARRINGTON

23 JUL 1980

